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IMPROVING PUBLIC SCHOOLS WITHIN EXISTING RESOURCES

Contributed
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by

Joseph Nathan

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Nathan establishes that school effectiveness can indeed be improved without significant new public spending. For example, school buildings could be shared with other community organizations or even private businesses — an innovation that would create dynamic learning environments while easing fiscal constraints through cost-sharing for maintenance, utilities, recreation facilities, and possibly computer equipment.

Attracting and retaining the best teachers call for a multi-faceted strategy, including measures to improve teacher morale and the creation of nontraditional teaching opportunities. Credentialing should be completely overhauled to make it easier to attract unusually qualified people into public school teaching, even if only part-time or temporary assignments. Contracting for the provision of specialized instructional services — such as foreign languages — should become common practice. Schools could team up with local industry to recruit outstanding teachers and give them opportunities to earn additional income from summer employment or part-time employment in the private sector during the school year.

Dr. Nathan reports on the growth of administrators as a percentage of public school personnel. He suggests that public school performance could be improved by redirecting existing resources away from administration and directly into the instructional program.

Finally, Dr. Nathan challenges teachers to take homework seriously, by which he means to treat homework as an integral part of the school's curriculum. Without a single new dollar, public school education could be made more effective if homework were well-conceived, related to the students' community life, and/or organized into group projects.

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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates how educators can improve student learning, increase resources available to schools, and make the teaching profession more attractive without spending additional tax funds. Section 1, "The School as Community Center," analyzes sharing school facilities with community organizations and easing fiscal constraints through cost-sharing. "Attracting and Retaining the Best Teachers," section 2, calls for a multifaceted strategy, including measures to improve teacher morale and the creation of nontraditional teaching opportunities. Credentialing should be changed to attract unusually qualified people, even if only for temporary assignments. Contracting for specialized instructional services should be a common practice. Schools could cooperate with local industry to recruit outstanding teachers. Section 3, "Reducing the Number of Administrators," discusses the growth of administrators as a percentage of public school personnel. School performance improves if resources are redirected away from administration and into the instructional program. Section 4, "More Challenging Homework," challenges teachers to treat homework as an integral part of curriculum. Without cost, educational effectiveness is achieved if homework is relevant to students' community life and is organized into group projects. References are included in each of the document's four sections. (CJH)

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IMPROVING PUBLIC SCHOOLS WITHIN EXISTING RESOURCES

by

Joseph Nathan

Joseph Nathan is an education writer whose latest book, *Free To Teach: Achieving Equity and Excellence in Schools*, was published in 1983. Dr. Nathan has 13 years of experience as an aide, teacher, and administrator in public schools and is the recipient of various awards from community, student, and professional organizations.

August 1984

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IMPROVING PUBLIC SCHOOLS WITHIN EXISTING RESOURCES

By Joseph Nathan

INTRODUCTION

Do any and all significant improvements in American schools require spending more money? Many professional educators answer "yes." The President of the National Education Association recently toured the country, insisting that "American schools will not improve until teachers receive a $25,000 starting salary." Other educators and concerned citizens believe there are ways to improve our schools without spending vast new sums of money. This paper will show how we can improve student learning, increase resources available to our schools, and make the teaching profession more attractive without spending more tax funds.

While more money can potentially improve our schools, much can be done without additional revenue. Americans always have been creative. We have responded to crises and learned to improvise — to make do. This brief is offered in that fundamental spirit of innovation, creativity, and cooperation.

THE SCHOOL AS COMMUNITY CENTER

Increasing school district funds without raising taxes is remarkably simple. School districts can generate additional income and improve learning opportunities by establishing community learning centers, in which social service agencies and businesses share space and building expenses with schools. Shared use of facilities will produce a number of benefits for all concerned.

Benefits to Businesses and Community Organizations

For businesspeople, access to the physical fitness facilities often found in schools will be of particular interest. Many companies recognize the value of encouraging their employees to remain fit and healthy. Companies that have considered building swimming pools, gymnasiums, and locker rooms, however, have found the costs staggering. Sharing a school building would offer access to such facilities as already exist. A school's gym or swimming pool might be reserved for adults over the lunch hour, for example, or for late afternoon, when after-school practices and events are finished.

Another benefit is that, together, schools, businesses, and/or community groups could afford more computers and advanced technology than if these entities were purchasing such items for themselves. Schools, social service agencies, and businesses have similar needs which computers can meet, including record-keeping, budget analysis and projection, and word processing. Obviously, there are differences in the tasks and levels of sophistication required by various agencies and corporations. Nevertheless, the same kinds of computers could perform many similar functions in diverse organizations.

Businesses providing services that range from television repair to dry cleaning may find a school building situated in the right area offers many advantages. Professionals such as photographers, doctors, lawyers, or real estate agents might also be attracted to a school building. Businesses look for heavily traveled areas in which to locate. From the consumers' standpoint, community members might find it extremely convenient to have a variety of commercial services available at the school building.

A day care program serving the employees and the wider community is another potential occupant for a community center. Having a day care facility right at one's work place would make many people's lives easier and would facilitate increased contact between parent and child throughout the day, as parents could visit their children on coffee and lunch breaks.

The availability of a nearby day care center offers opportunities for instructors to help students learn about child development. When older students make occasional observations or even provide volunteer services to day care programs, both the day care children and the older youngsters benefit from the experience.

Other enterprises would provide different forms of enrichment to

classes. Senior high school students might serve as interns or apprentices to professionals or craftspeople who are located nearby. Students who volunteered would be learning about career options, while the businesses would gain assistance with some aspect of their operations.

Easing Fiscal Constraints

Shared use of facilities offers clear financial advantages to the participating groups. For schools, it is an alternative to the no-win choices many areas currently face: close school buildings or lay off teachers. In the last few years, many communities have gone through bitter struggles over school closings. Joint use of a school is a reasonable alternative to closing it, and it is one that probably would be much more popular.

Building security and maintenance could be a joint responsibility. Thus, participating organizations would have more money available for other purposes. For schools, this means more money available for salaries, equipment, and supplies.

A recent article reports the dramatic impact of high heating bills. A 1983 study of the American Association of School Administrators found that "more than 60 percent of the nation's urban school districts plan to lay off teachers and other personnel in order to help pay their heating bills this winter." Clearly, the increasing cost of energy is a major factor in school district budgets. Sharing facilities will help bring other organizations who can help pay the fuel bills into space that now is sitting empty.

Creating Dynamic Learning Environments

In Ortonville, Minnesota, many secondary students know more about computers than most of the businesspeople in town. High school students in Ortonville are keeping financial records for a number of local farmers as part of their course work. In some schools, art students are producing bright, cheerful murals. Students in one St. Paul junior high school produced a film strip on cancer which a local hospital is now using for orientation of its teenage patients.

The idea of having schools and non-profit community agencies share facilities is not new. For almost 50 years, the Mott Foundation in Flint, Michigan, has been encouraging school officials to move in this direction. Despite its many benefits, the idea has been tried in

relatively few places. Where the concept is operational, however, the results are enormously popular.

*In *New Haven, Connecticut*, the school district and city have cooperated by establishing the Conte Community School. Open since 1962, the complex includes a shared auditorium, pool, and gymnasium.

**The Boston Public Schools System* has 18 elementary schools that share space with social service agencies. The Quincy Community School has more than a dozen social service agencies and occupies an entire city block. Because the small site does not have much room for playgrounds, the roof is devoted to recreation. The building's gymnasium is shared between the school and community groups. One corner of Quincy's city block is occupied by a high-rise apartment building for senior citizens. Consequently, extensive contact has evolved between seniors and the youngsters.

**The City and School District of Wichita, Kansas* cooperatively operate a library in one building. Patrons, whether pre-schoolers or senior citizens, gain from a large collection and range of services made possible by pooling city and school resources. The concept has worked so well in Wichita that a second "shared-use library" has been opened in another elementary school.

Establishing a shared library produced a number of issues. Among those issues were: Would employees report to the city, school district, or both? Which system would be used to catalogue books? Which hours would the building be open? Each of these was reviewed thoroughly with an eye to "how can we resolve these issues?" rather than "these important differences will prevent cooperation." People in Wichita say the fact that a decision was made to move ahead prior to the discussions among librarians produced a much more productive, positive tone than might otherwise have developed.

**Montgomery County, Maryland* has established a formal policy for leasing surplus space. The policy includes criteria for designating space as "surplus," a process for notifying the community, and criteria for selecting from among those groups that request space to lease. This district may have gone further than any other in the country in sorting through the complexities of the issue.

Among other uses, the district leases space to private schools. The district receives more than $800,000 from approximately 24 private schools that occupy buildings that formerly were public schools. Obviously, this decision has been controversial. Neverthe-

less, the Board decided that it made sense to make the buildings available for learning programs as they were originally intended. Rent from the buildings helps improve other public schools in the county.

Existing Experiments with Non-instructional Uses of School Buildings

Housing corporations in the community schools is a step beyond what Mott suggested and beyond what most communities have done. Such public-private partnerships do exist, however, and attorneys say the concept appears not to violate the law. In general, non-profit institutions are allowed to accept revenue from private sources so long as it is used to fulfill the non profits' purposes.

The suburban school district of Edina, Minnesota, is leasing to profit-making groups. The Minneapolis suburb has turned a vacant high school into a community center which houses, among other ventures, a private computer academy. Even this progressive district, however, has not yet started the kind of shared use facility recommended here.

New York City is developing the shared-use concept. The city and school district have created a special joint bonding authority (the New York City Educational Construction Fund) which has allowed the construction of a number of buildings. These buildings include schools, apartment buildings, social service agencies, and businesses.

The New York City Fund is empowered to sell or lease residential or commercial space and air rights in the schools it plans. Land is scarce and expensive in New York City. As Fund officials point out: "The use of air rights actually provides new and unique areas for development. Combining public schools with private structures also provides the City with a source of revenue which would be lost to it if only a school were built."

The Academy for Educational Development in New York City has prepared several publications which describe successful shared facilities. Their most recent book, *Community School Centers*, includes excellent recommendations for designing, planning, and managing a shared program. The detail they provide is extremely helpful for anyone interested in the concept.

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ATTRACTING AND RETAINING THE BEST TEACHERS

Legislators and school board members will be making a tragic and costly mistake if they rely exclusively on increasing salaries to make teaching a more attractive profession. The evidence is mounting that other steps must also be taken to attract and encourage effective senior instructors and talented prospective teachers. We must reverse the incentives in our public schools so that there are rewards for competence — not compliance; innovation — not inaction; creativity — not conformity; and ultimately, results — not rationalizations.

Here and there, programs are developing which rely on increased authority and accountability for individual schools. In such schools, teachers are released from bureaucratic restrictions, are encouraged to use the most effective techniques, and allow themselves to be held responsible for the results!

Attempts to increase teachers' accountability are made directly in response to recent research about the teaching profession. The Carnegie Foundation completed a major study of America's public school educators. Foundation President and former U.S. Commissioner of Education Ernest Boyer states: "The climate we found among teachers is affected very severely by a feeling of powerlessness — the growth of decision making beyond the school and accountability beyond the classroom."

Boyer insists that the answer is not simply more money and higher salaries. "To talk about recruiting better students into teaching without examining the circumstances that discourage teachers is simply a diversion . . . We discovered that teachers are troubled not only about salaries but about loss of status, bureaucratic pressure, a negative public image, and lack of recognition and rewards."

Dr. John Goodlad, Dean of the UCLA School of Education, recently studied more than 1,000 classrooms around the country. He found that teachers knew many more appropriate and effective instructional techniques than they were allowed to use. "Teachers may start out 'fighting the system' but it is much easier, ultimately, to settle down into conventional ways of teaching. And one tends to look more 'normal' by doing so. The cards are stacked against deviation and innovation."

Teachers need new career options. One alternative involves teaching part-time in schools and working part-time in other organizations. Rochester, Minnesota Public Schools and International Business Machines, for example, have established a program in which teachers work part-time for both organizations. During the school year, teachers split their time between schools and IBM. IBM pays the teachers' salaries during the summer. Teachers at IBM have performed such services as training the personnel who make public presentations and helping to design in-service instructional programs. This program is entering its fourth year.

Improving Teacher Morale

Recent reports cite alarming statistics about attitudes toward teaching. Twenty years ago, about 60 percent of teachers said if they were just starting out, they would definitely go into teaching again. Today, only 21 percent of public school teachers definitely would enter the profession again. Ten years ago, about 75 percent of parents surveyed said they would be pleased to have a child become a public school teacher. Today the figure is under 50 percent.

Morale problems affect teachers' use of their skills. Both locally and nationally, standardized test scores of prospective teachers are significantly lower than the average of their college classmates. Those people scoring highest are most likely to leave teaching; those scoring lowest are most likely to remain. While standardized test scores don't tell us everything about teachers as a group, they are one important indicator.

Several programs in schools around the country have attracted and retained excellent teachers by treating them as true professionals. Bureaucratic interference, for example, has been limited. Classes don't always last 55 minutes, and instructors work with fewer students at a time. Teachers are allowed to use the textbooks they select and are not overwhelmed by forms to fill out. The

products are higher teacher morale and significant improvements in student achievement, *without* increased costs.

Successful Teacher-Initiated Innovations

In the Chicago area, a former public school teacher/administrator named Jim Boyle has established a series of programs for violent, disruptive students. Dissatisfied with constraints placed on him by suburban school districts, Boyle decided to develop his own project. Six years ago, Boyle approached five school districts and asked them to send him 10-15 of their most difficult high school students and pay him the per pupil allotment they received from the State of Illinois.

Boyle was successful, and his operation has expanded to more school districts in Illinois and even in Arizona. "Ombudsman" shows that schools can be held accountable for factors such as improved attendance, standardized test scores, self-concept ratings by students, and reductions in criminal activity. Ombudsman students have demonstrated statistically significant improvement in each of these areas.

Boyle rents store fronts, purchases computers, and hires talented staff. The staff uses the most effective teaching techniques available. Students start at their personal skill levels and move up at their own pace. The learning atmosphere is orderly, calm, informal, and optimistic that each student will succeed. Students must demonstrate competence in a number of areas in order to graduate.

Test scores of the Ombudsman students consistently show significant gains. Boyle is working with students who hated their large, well-equipped suburban schools and showed their contempt through teacher harassment, vandalism, and truancy. He and his staff transformed students' attitudes toward learning and themselves. The kids care deeply about what they are doing, believe it is worthwhile, and feel they are learning for the first time in many years. Students feel well-treated, encouraged, respected, and assisted. The Ombudsman program works for them.

A somewhat similar program called Educational Clinics, Inc., operates in Everett and Tacoma, Washington. Once again, the "clients" are turned off, alienated high school students. The teachers have been freed of bureaucratic restrictions and encouraged to use the most appropriate techniques.

The results, according to David Ammons of the Associated Press,

are that teachers "say they get to do what they most want, to teach the basics intensively." Accountability is direct: no demand for teachers' services means no job. So far, this hasn't been a problem. Ammons says that the clinics are filled and there are long waiting lists; absenteeism is the exception. According to a recent audit by the Legislative Budget Committee, the cost is about $1,000 per student — or about half the state aid for a year of public school.

Recent projects funded by the Northwest Area Foundation illustrate another related approach to school improvement. Judith Healey of the Foundation states: "We are trying to promote radical change in the school system by modifying the rigid hierarchical structure of decision-making. Our aim is to encourage risk-taking and experiments in the hope that positive student learning outcomes will result." Funds have been awarded in Oregon, Washington, and Minnesota to school districts that have agreed to increase opportunities for staff and parents to help make major decisions about the schools' curriculum, budget allocations, staffing patterns, class schedules, and course requirements.

Several school districts will be using "quality circle" approaches — a concept developed in Japanese industry. Several schools on Mercer Island near Seattle, and in Oregon City, Oregon will use these techniques to increase involvement and improve productivity. Mercer Island also hopes to develop a recognition and reward system for staff, community, and students.

Ombudsman, Educational Clinics Inc., and the school site management work supported by Northwest Area Foundation are encouraging attempts to reduce factors that frustrate and inhibit excellent teachers. Results from Illinois and Washington show that even previously alienated students with poor skills can make significant progress, that parents will support effective education, and that teachers welcome increased accountability when it is accompanied by more authority.

Under heavy pressure to increase education funding, policy makers should study these programs. In the last 20 years, more than $15 billion has been spent to improve public schools, particularly in low income urban areas. Unquestionably, some schools make wise use of additional funds. But additional billions of dollars have not solved this country's education problems.

In far too many schools, educators are unnecessarily restricted, discouraged, and confined. The most effective programs clearly tell us that policy makers should honor and encourage our finest

teachers. Critical reforms in education must unleash the creativity, energy, and human potential of this nation.

Improvements in Teacher Training

What steps could be taken to improve the training of teachers? Virtually everyone agrees that the most effective teachers have certain skills which can be learned: ability to maintain order in a classroom, ability to use a variety of instructional techniques, ability to stimulate class discussions, ability to explain directions clearly, and so on. What mix of experiences will help prospective teachers gain these skills?

Some argue that we ought to have a far more significant internship program for prospective teachers. Dr. Chester Finn of Vanderbilt University has urged that we "abolish the presumption that the graduate of a teachers' college is automatically qualified to possess a teacher's license." Finn suggests establishing an extensive apprenticeship program, supervised by master teachers. He correctly points out that the "student teaching" experience many teacher candidates have is a hit or miss proposition. There is no guarantee whatever that the student candidate will be placed in an effective teacher's classroom. The teacher, being paid an extremely modest fee, has little incentive to work with the college student. Many teachers simply turn over their classes to the college student and go to the faculty lounge for coffee.

Finn has worked with Tennessee's Governor Lamar Alexander to create a career-master teacher plan which includes provisions for some unusually effective teachers to work 11-12 months. These excellent teachers would spend part of their day with prospective teachers and part with students. Finn urges that people be allowed to enter a teacher apprenticeship program without a teaching certificate. He would pay apprentices somewhat less, while paying somewhat more to the master teachers who supervise them.

This idea provides opportunities for young people to enter schools with a strong background in a particular field (math, science, history, English) gained at a college or university. Then, the person would spend a year or more working with and learning from a teacher who has been judged to be excellent and effective.

Al olish Certification

Another approach is to abolish certification requirements. As UCLA Professor Don Erickson wrote recently, ". . . there is no evidence that teacher certification is critical to student acquisition of skills essential to good citizenship . . . " Erickson believes strongly that schools should not be limited to hiring only teachers who are certified.

Monsignor Francis Barrett, executive director of the National Catholic Education Association says: "Certificates are a farce. There is a distinct difference between qualified and certified. If anything, applicants with an education degree might be well advised to omit that fact when they're applying for a parochial school job."

Minimize Barriers to Entry

Talented professionals should be given the opportunity in mid-career to opt into teaching with minimum restrictions. Harvard University is sponsoring a Mid-career Math and Science program this year for mathematicians and scientists who will become eligible to teach in Massachusetts schools after a one-year concentrated program. These professionals are eager to spend time teaching in elementary or secondary schools. Some of them plan to return to their careers; others intend to stay in teaching.

Participants in the Harvard program come from various backgrounds. One who has a Ph.D. in chemical engineering and was not satisfied with his research position says: "I've acquired all this knowledge, and I'm looking for an opportunity to pass it along. It's not that I don't feel good about engineering. But I'd feel better if I had a chance to pass this along to some students."

Another participant had a military career and has owned and operated several small businesses. One of those businesses specialized in computers. This person has been thinking about teaching for years and is eager to get into the classroom.

The Harvard program uses a rigorous selection process. It looks for people who have a sensitivity to working with others and a likelihood of success in a classroom. The current class includes potential physics, chemistry, and math teachers. Several have strong computer aptitudes and skills. Clearly, this program provides a non-traditional path into the classroom. Inquiries regarding the program's structure and effectiveness already have been received from California, Washington, D.C., South Carolina, Texas, Okla-

homa, and Michigan.

In Ohio, the Toledo Public Schools have established a "consulting teacher" program. The participating teachers serve as consultants for three years, then return to the classroom. Their major responsibilities are to advise beginning *and* tenured teachers regarding their classroom problems. In addition to working with existing faculty, consulting teachers make recommendations to a review board — composed of teachers and administrators — that decides which teachers to retain. Consulting teachers receive $1,250 more per year than classroom teachers. This program has been endorsed by the President of the American Federation of Teachers. It is worth noting that more teachers have been dismissed during the three years the consulting teacher program has been operating than during the preceding five years, when exclusively principals had responsibility for staff evaluation.

College graduates in Massachusetts who did not major in education but who wish to teach may enroll in a teacher internship program coordinated by the University of Massachusetts. Mentor teachers serve as tutors during the summer before the interns begin teaching and continue assisting them throughout the school year. Mentors receive $3,000 stipends for summer teaching and additional stipends for their school-year supervisorial activities. Digital Corporation cooperates in this venture by hiring the interns for part-time employment over three years. Several other advanced technology companies and a major bank have indicated their interest in hiring interns during the upcoming year. This program has completed its first year.

Citizens are right to be concerned about the skills that teachers have. One way to attract new, talented people into the profession is to provide a variety of paths through which they can enter it. Models are available. It is up to those in decision making positions to make use of these models and to require careful evaluation of the results.

The alternative is to accept a teacher work force with declining ability. National reports agree that the scores of college students going into teacher-preparation programs are below national averages. While teachers scoring highest on standardized tests are not necessarily the most effective instructors, it is clear that teachers who themselves can barely read, write, or compute will have difficulty helping young children to learn those skills. This is a critical and timely area for reform.

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REDUCING THE NUMBER OF ADMINISTRATORS

Ask many teachers about their school districts and one of the first comments you will hear is: "We have too many administrators." This

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is a problem not only in large metropolitan districts but also in suburban and rural districts. The differences nationally between public and private school administrative levels are staggering. One major step which could be taken to do more within existing resources would involve significantly reducing administrative staff.

Nationally, the figures show "a proliferating school bureaucracy." *Fortune* reported recently, for example, that the number of pupils per administrator has dropped from 523 in 1949-50 to 295 in 1979-80.

Catholic Schools/Public Schools

The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago compared administrative staff size in Chicago's Catholic and public schools. Twice as many students were attending public as Catholic schools (approximately 500,000 to Catholic schools' 250,000), but the public schools had *100 times* more central office administrators! Denis Doyle of the American Enterprise Institute comments:

"Catholic schools have fewer administrators not because they are more virtuous, but because they cannot afford more. Administrators are a luxury, but the price is too high in more than dollars. The absence of administrators is itself a virtue, because it both permits and forces teacher professionalism. In Chicago's schools, short of the Cardinal, there is no one to whom the buck may be passed. Catholic school teachers, like it or not, are professionals."

Danielle Schultz compared the public and Catholic schools in the District of Columbia. She concluded that "the Archdiocese of Washington has a total of ten administrators for approximately 28,278 pupils, a figure that does not include 11,500 students in high schools run by separate Catholic religious groups. That's a ratio of 1 administrator to every 2,828 students. Washington's public schools have 421 administrative and supervisory personnel (not including principals or in-school administrators) for 91,509 students, a ratio of one administrator for every 217 students."

A recent study showed that the archdiocesan schools in the metropolitan Minneapolis-St. Paul area had about 11,000 more students than the St. Paul Public Schools (43,000 to 32,000). Yet, the public schools had more than 10 times as many central office administrators. The Minneapolis Citizens for Public Education compared the number of central office administrators and non-teachers in the

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1967-68 and 1982-83 school years. This study showed that, during that 15-year period, the number of public school students had declined by 46 percent, the number of teachers had declined by 29 percent, and the number of central office administrators and non-classroom teachers had increased by 285 percent!

In suburban and rural areas, the numbers are not as dramatic, but the problem is still evident. Many teachers point out that most small districts have their own administrative staff, regardless of the size of the district. Rather than share a superintendent, principal, or other administrative staff, many districts insist on hiring their own. This reduces the funds available for other uses.

Increased Demand for Administrators

What has produced this dramatic increase in administration? In part, the answer is federal and state mandates to public schools. Schools find themselves increasingly involved, for example, in efforts to provide services to handicapped and bilingual students. Legislative and judicial demands have intensified for desegregated schools to overcome residential segregation and to equalize learning and extra-curricular opportunities for young women and men. Sometimes, funds have been provided by the federal or state government to help accomplish these tasks. The schools built ever larger bureaucracies. But when outside money dwindled, the number of administrators was often maintained. Few people wanted to reduce the number of others who reported to them.

Numerous books were written during the 1970's about the strong tendency of bureaucracies to perpetuate themselves. Nowhere is this more evident than in public schools. Nevertheless, colleges of education have shown little interest in exploring or exposing the issue. They are responsible, among other things, for training prospective administrators. Colleges want their graduates to win teaching and administrative positions in the schools. Some college professors feel it would be "biting the hand that feeds them" to raise questions about the size of a central office bureaucracy.

Management of Decline

Despite the growth of expectations imposed on schools, including judicial and legislative mandates, it is possible to reduce the number of central office administrators. Recently, for example, the St. Paul Board of Education decided it would have to reduce staff and

ordered the superintendent to prepare an administrative reorganization plan. The Board noted the system was staffed administratively for 50,000 students, which had been the peak population in the early 1970's, but that it now had only 32,000 students. The Superintendent prepared a plan which cut central office positions by combining responsibilities.

The reorganization in St. Paul consolidated positions for math, science, reading, language arts, industrial arts, home economics, art, and social studies "coordinators." These eight positions — each of which cost the district almost $50,000 per year in wages and benefits — were consolidated into four positions.

Another way to reduce administrative costs is to cooperate with other school districts. In rural areas, sometimes people are responsible for special education in more than one district. Similarly, a superintendent or principal could report to several districts, allowing the districts to keep their schools open while reducing costs at the same time.

Citizen Action

What can concerned citizens do? The first step is to find out how many central office administrators and how many students your school district has. The next is to compare the numbers today with the numbers 5 or 10 years ago. The third step is to develop possible alternatives, such as combining positions or sharing administrators. Talk with others in the community about this issue, review your research, and get reactions to your suggestions. Present your findings to legislators or school board members, and ask for their reactions.

Be prepared for strong negative reactions from central office administrators. No one wants to give up her or his job. However, school districts *can* operate with fewer administrators. Your efforts will free up significant funds for other purposes. Remember that success requires persistence and considerable attention to detail.

For further information, see:

Brimelow, Peter, "What to Do About America's Schools," *Fortune* (September 19, 1983).

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MORE CHALLENGING HOMEWORK

Why are a few lucky parents finding that their children eagerly spend hours on homework? Probably because their children attend classes in which math, writing, and research skills are integrated and used to help solve community problems. In overwhelming numbers, students report they both enjoy and learn much more from such courses. Before accepting recent recommendations for more homework, educators and parents ought to consider these courses and the quality of typical assignments.

"GUTS"

New York City's South Bronx is nationally known as a difficult area. The staff at Intermediate School 139 used this environment to help students learn how they can make a difference. Students and staff created GUTS (Government Understanding for Today's Students).

Students began by conducting a neighborhood survey of problems. One of the most frequent requests was for more accurate health care information. Working during and after school hours, GUTS students organized a community health fair which provided free health information, testing, and referrals.

Students spent several years improving their neighborhood's appearance. They successfully overcame a variety of obstacles to create and maintain a community garden where abandoned buildings and rubble previously stood. Several of the school's classes use the garden in their studies. An English class wrote about the garden's history, industrial arts students built signs identifying various plants in the garden, home economics students developed recipes based on the garden's produce, and science students used the garden as a laboratory.

In addition to serving their community, the students surprised their teachers and parents with their enthusiasm for coursework. Writing and reading scores showed dramatic improvement.

Consumer Protection

Reading, writing, and research skills also improved for a number of Minnesota teenagers in a consumer law class. The students read books, talked with experts, and then worked on more than 250 consumer problems that were referred to them by adults in the community. They successfully resolved about 75 percent.

In one case, a woman asked for help in obtaining a radio that was owed to her by a car dealership. After discussing the case, students wrote back to ask for proof of her allegations and received, by return mail, a copy of the contract. Students then called the dealership's owner, explained the situation, and asked for his help. They learned that the salesman had quit shortly after the sale was made, and the contract had been misfiled. The dealer promised to take care of the problem immediately.

Students knew that "the check is in the mail" doesn't always mean it is, so they wrote back to the lady. She enthusiastically responded that the owner was an honest man "and even gave us a better radio than we expected because of all the hassle."

In this class, students used and improved their research and writing skills. Equally important, they learned how to have a positive impact in their community. They wrote a booklet, explaining how to start a consumer action program; the booklet was purchased by more than 5,000 people.

Community Health Education

Students and staff at Philadelphia's Simon Gratz High School created a new approach to biology and health education. Working with the local Tuberculosis and Health Associations, the students developed for elementary school students only, puppet shows, comic books, posters, and cartoon strips on good health practices. Student presentations covered topics such as drug abuse, alcoholism, venereal disease, and tuberculosis. The school was overwhelmed with request for the program, and the students volunteered many of their evenings and weekends to promote the project.

Murals

A Minnesota teacher showed similar creativity in dealing with a local problem. The school's walls were covered with sexual and racial comments. He and his students approached the school's

principal with a suggestion. Why not allow some of the students to create wall murals? The principal agreed, and the wall writing stopped. Instead, 8-10 foot murals at the high school now depict students playing hockey, football, and basketball. Other murals illustrate Greek mythlogy and famous Americans. Students came in early and stayed late to complete these projects.

Energy

Pennsylvania high school students were equally willing to spend extra hours on a stimulating project. Their advanced physics teacher started a home energy audit service for local families. Using many of the principles learned in class, students visited homes and gave families information about low cost steps they could take to reduce energy costs. The students used their school's computers to produce energy audits which showed families exactly how much energy could be saved and how long it would take to pay for various conservation steps.

Community Development Corporations

Johnathan Sher, Assistant Dean at North Carolina State University, has explained how school projects can be used to develop a stronger economic base. He helped initiate "school-based community development corporations," which involve having young people provide services for others while improving their own skills, earning money for their schools, and trying out possible careers.

In one county, high school students discovered there was no day care center. They and a home economics teacher started one in the high school; immediately, it was deluged with applications. The state certified the high school to train day care helpers and, since then, several of the program's graduates have opened centers of their own.

Community development corporations benefit both the young people and the wider community. Many rural areas are concerned about the migration of young people to cities in search of jobs and challenge. "CDC's" provide both jobs and challenge by building on the talents, interests, and resource bases that exist within the local community.

A dramatic example was developed in rural Georgia. More than a decade ago, an English teacher in Rabun Gap re-evaluated his work. His students were poor writers and were indifferent to drills on

grammar and parts of speech. The teacher decided he would either find an effective way to change his approach or quit.

He started a magazine about the area. Students interviewed long-time residents, took pictures, and ultimately assumed a major share of the magazine's production activities. Their magazine, called *Foxfire*, has been sold throughout the world. *Foxfire* articles have appeared in well-known anthologies.

One of the most powerful articles which ever appeared in the magazine described residents' reaction to a movie which was filmed in their county. They were told that the movie would be sympathetic to their area. But when *Deliverance* was shown, many people felt betrayed. *Foxfire* told their story.

Foxfire inspired teachers throughout the country. Students and teachers in New York City's Lower East Side (*Fourth Street*), Maryland's Chesapeake Bay area (*Skipjack*), South Dakota's Pine Ridge Sioux reservation (*Hoyekiya*), and dozens of other communities started similar magazines. This approach to writing gives meaning to students' assignments while building community pride.

Youth Participation Projects

Programs such as *Foxfire*, "GUTS," or the consumer action program are called "youth participation projects." The National Commission on Resources for Youth (NCRY) in Boston has defined four major characteristics of such projects. They are that young people:

1. Help to solve a real need;
2. Gain skills as they work on the project;
3. Work cooperatively with an adult and help make decisions about the project; and
4. Have an opportunity to discuss, evaluate, and refine the project.

NCRY was started by a dynamic 70-year-old, a former San Francisco juvenile court referee named Mary Conway Kohler. Kohler recalls being discouraged by the repeaters she saw in court, and she decided to find a better way to assist youth. In the last decade, her ideas have been endorsed by the National Task Force on Citizenship Education, the National Panel on High Schools and Adolescent Education, and the National Commission on Reform of Secondary Education.

Careful evaluation documents the value of these programs. The

University of Minnesota Center for Youth Development asked more than 4,000 young people from all types of schools about their experiences with youth participation programs. Seventy-seven percent said they learned much more, and only 14 percent said they learned less than in other classes. A Federal Delinquency Prevention publication describes these programs as "promising broad and lasting benefits at moderate cost."

Youth participation projects can reflect an individual teacher's expertise and interests. Many educators find the projects to be more rewarding. Students are more interested and alert. Rather than viewing the teacher as an obstacle, this approach to school reform sees faculty as a valuable resource.

Credit for community service has been endorsed strongly by adults throughout the country. The 1978 Gallup poll asked a representative national sample whether they would like their community schools to enable all juniors and seniors to perform some kind of community service for course credit. More than 86 percent answered "yes."

Two major national study groups recommended youth participation projects in the late 1970's. The National Task Force on Citizenship Education said: "A practicum in civic education should be required for graduation from high school. This could be completed in supervised volunteer service projects . . . which should be related to work in the classroom and monitored by teaching personnel."

The 1976 National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education noted:

"Educational programs should be inaugurated for the joint participation of adolescents and other interested and qualified adults in the programs which may be designated participatory education (learning by doing what is socially useful, personally satisfying and health-supporting for the community)."

Despite these recommendations and endorsements, the National Center for Service Learning found that only 16 percent of our secondary schools allow students to "become involved in community service as a component of their academic program." Why are there not more participants and programs?

These projects are not more expensive than lectures or read-the-textbook-and-answer-questions techniques. They do require more effort, however, on the part of teachers and administrators. Most universities don't train teachers to utilize such methods, in part because most university instructors have little or no experience with

them.

Some educators fear that parents will not accept such programs. They say that parents *want* nothing but drill and practice for their children. Advocates suggest that these programs should be optional, rather than required. When offered in this way, demonstrations show that parents have been supportive. Most parents are deeply gratified when their children come home enthusiastic and excited about coursework.

Well-designed youth participation programs do not create choice between academic and applied learning. Rather, they bring together many significant learning principles. Carefully youth participation programs help young people gain basic *and* applied academic skills and the confidence to use those skills to improve their communities.

Down with Boredom

In most classes, youngsters are given assignments with little import or impact. UCLA Education Dean John Goodlad's recent national survey found that most school activity follows this pattern of empty exercises from dull textbooks. Students don't do their best work when they're bored; they don't put much effort into work that appears to be assigned primarily to fill time. In fact, recent studies show almost half the nation's children say they are not challenged by their course work.

Many parents cannot understand why youngsters do not learn to write or compute. "What are those teachers doing with our children?" they wonder. Day after day, kids go to school, bring work home, and get decent grades. But in the end, they have minimal skills. What went wrong?

The National Commission on Excellence in Education recommended that schools assign more homework to students, hoping that this would improve their skills. The important question is: "What sort of homework?"

"*More* homework" is a simplistic recommendation. It doesn't differentiate between five pages of worksheets and a five-page report on community concerns. Youth participation projects can help produce more effective schools. These programs develop teenagers' academic skills while nourishing their best instincts.

Anyone who has watched a school's doors open at the end of the day knows how much human energy bursts out at the final bell. The potential for growth and learning is there — waiting to be stimulated,

challenged, and encouraged.

For further information, see:

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